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## **‘They are not serious like the boys’: gender norms and contradictions for girls in rural Kenya**

This paper reconsiders urban-rural and modern-traditional dichotomies by exploring the multiple and contested gendered issues that secondary school girls face in rural Kisii, Western Kenya. Findings are drawn from a qualitative case study and explore the ways that gendered norms interact with new ideas of gender equity in and out of the classroom. It is argued that this rural setting offers a highly complex environment for poor girls in secondary schools who often face multiple challenges. Conclusions suggest that these are at risk of being overlooked by assumptions that the rural is timeless, static and isolated. Implications are considered for the reconceptualisation of ideas of gender equity in education to go beyond quantitative measures such as enrolment and parity of attention in class to account for out-of-school challenges and the ways in which girls are treated while in school.

Keywords: gender; education; rurality; Kenya; teachers; self-worth

### **Introduction**

The urban-rural divide in educational attendance and attainment, and the ways in which this is accentuated in relation to gender, has been widely noted. The 2012 Global Monitoring Report, for example, highlights that ‘where young people live can...determine their educational opportunities with rural/urban or regional divisions reinforced by gender’ (UNESCO 2013, 26). In the Education for All (EFA) era, discussions of urban/rural and male/female divides in policy literature have often been characterised by quantitative measures. As Unterhalter and North (2011) have convincingly argued, gender equality has tended to be condensed in African Ministries to one of net enrolment rates and teacher ratios. This can have the consequence that issues of equity for those in school are rarely documented.

There is an increasing call for the educational and social contexts that maintain gender inequalities to be given greater attention (Aikman, Halai, and Rubagiza 2011). This has the potential to enable more understanding of the multiple vulnerabilities facing girls which make accessing, and fully engaging in, an equitable education difficult. While gender and rurality are both recognised equity issues, few have taken rurality as a method of inquiry to analyse how they interplay to create particularly challenging educational realities for many girls living in rural areas. This article draws on rurality literature to explore the ways in which gender, rurality and education interrelate to create an environment of multiple vulnerabilities for girls attending secondary school in rural Kenya (Balfour, de Lange, and Khau 2012; Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane 2008; Moletsane and Ntombela 2010; Woods 2010). Central to taking a rurality perspective is the argument that there is a broader social context which actively defines attitudes that limit the agency of girls and women.

This paper draws on a qualitative study concerning educational quality and equity based in two public day secondary schools in one rural community in Kisii, Western Kenya, in which out-of-school challenges emerged as inter-related barriers for girls to regularly attend and achieve a quality education. The paper first presents an overview of the rurality perspective in relation to gender and education before introducing the research study from which the findings are drawn. There follows a detailed account of the rural community and school contexts and some of the out of school challenges that girls faced. Teachers' gendered attitudes are then discussed with reference to evidence of their reproduction in the texts of students and the influence of their views and specific challenges on girls' feelings of self-worth. Conclusions suggest that girls in this one rural community face multiple challenges which are at risk of being overlooked by reliance on statistical data

and an assumption that the rural is static and timeless. Implications are discussed in relation to current measures for gender equality and it is argued that we need to go beyond such measures of enrolment and parity of attention in class to account for the out-of-school challenges and the ways in which girls are treated while in school.

### **Gender, education and rurality**

Rurality research is largely associated, by urban-based teachers in rural areas, rural learners, and campus-based student-teachers, with contextual assumptions concerned with deficit and disadvantage ... there is a need to conceptualize a new theory of rurality that might account both for the diversity of lived experiences and ideas and for the drivers that enable or disable the transformation of such contexts. (Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane 2008, 98)

Dominant discourses about the rural are often concerned with stereotypical representations of the rural space drawing on key concepts such as isolation, backwardness and tradition. In Western contexts, it is also characterised as idyllic, community-focused and inhabited by the White middle-class (Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane 2008; Woods 2010). Such definitions of rurality have had the tendency to be defined through oppositions, the rural being seen as the urban's 'other' (Cloke 2006, 18–19). This has determined a prevalence of popular conceptions 'whereby the innocence of the rural exists in binaries as a foil to the corruption of the urban; the naivety of the rural contrasts to the sophistication of the urban; the ignorance of the rural and the knowing of the urban' (Balfour, de Lange, and Khau 2012, ii). Recent rurality research is revealing the ways in which such popular discourses of the rural-urban divide have resulted in certain phenomena or groups being rendered invisible in rural contexts. The study of rural homelessness in the United Kingdom by Cloke, Millbourne and Widdowfield (2002), for example, revealed how this concept lay outside the dominant formulations of what constitutes the rural with the outcome that they are excluded from public and government discourses.

In recent years, scholars of rurality have questioned the validity of such binaries in urban-rural studies (Bryant and Pini 2011; Woods 2010). These authors have drawn on theories of globalization and considered its impact for the diminishing of difference between the urban and rural. This would suggest that such binary concepts suggesting distinctly different contexts need to be questioned and challenged. However, the paradox that comes here is that scholars of rurality both reject the urban-rural dichotomy but also recognize that the rural still deserves to be a place of study. This is based on the argument that those living in rural areas have uniquely challenging experiences through the nature of the rural's remoteness, for example in the continued and frequent inaccessibility of social services such as healthcare and education, and the increasing presence of more 'urban' issues.

Away from this growing attention among scholars of rurality, in the wider academic and public discourses, there remains a tendency for certain societal issues to be viewed as urban phenomena, with little policy or research attention about the ways in which these are being played out in rural contexts. Of particular relevance for this article are the number of in-depth studies in Kenyan cities which reveal 'urbanised' problems such as patronage sexuality and illegal abortions (Arnot et al. 2010; Kenya Human Rights Commission 2010). By contrast, challenges associated with girls in rural areas tend to be both underexplored and explained by traditional concerns such as early marriage, circumcision and expectations to carry out home chores (see for example, Chege and Sifuna 2006).

As Moletsane and Ntombela (2010) have argued, rurality is seldom seen as something worthy of study. Rather, the rural is seen as just the context or background 'in which scholars locate analyses of what they regard as issues more worthy of scholarly

interrogation’ (Moletsane and Ntombela 2010, 4). To take just one example of an article published in this journal in 2013 in which Gerver (2013) analyses sexual abuse in rural areas of Rwanda. The study offers interesting insights to a pertinent issue which resonates with some of my findings discussed below but it makes little mention of the rural context or the ways in which the rural space impacts the discussion.

Rather than seeing the rural as simply the background or context of this study, I support Balfour et al. (2012, vii) who ‘suggest that rurality is an active agent and central, both as lived experience and as a social and transformative agent in which teachers and community workers are changed’. This article aims to contribute to the growing literature around the intersection of gender, education and rurality. The 2010 special issue of *Agenda* recognized that rurality is seldom studied in its own right and ‘even more silenced are the gender dynamics that characterise the rural condition’ (Moletsane & Ntombela, 2010: 5). This included the article by Bhana (2010) which explores the ways in which gender equalities are negotiated and defined in the early years. She argues that teachers play an important role in continuing and/or challenging gender norms within the classroom that can have wider implications for achieving gender equality (Bhana 2010). This literature suggests the important role of educational institutions and practitioners and their contextualized prejudices and attitudes in defining gender norms. Much of this literature in Africa has been from Southern African contexts with few considering the intersection of these three phenomena in East African, or more specifically Kenyan, studies. This article seeks to remedy this by exploring the ways in which gender is constituted and norms reproduced within two secondary schools in rural Kenya.

## **The research design**

This article draws on doctoral research which explored contextualised understandings of educational quality in Kenyan secondary education within a social justice and postcolonial framework (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). This took place over a period of five months in 2011 taking one rural community, and two of its secondary schools, in the Kisii region of Western Kenya as a case study.<sup>1</sup> I employed a range of qualitative and participatory methods with stakeholders both within and outside of the two schools. At the schools, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen teachers and ten management committee members. Participatory methods were introduced for student participation. Ten female and ten male Form IV (final year) students were given either a camera or diary to document their educational realities before these texts were used as the basis for a narrative interview. Younger students were also included through essay writing (twenty) and poster drawing (eight groups).

Policy and popular literature can often discuss ‘the rural girl’ as though all girls share a common identity, experience and challenges (See, for example, Chege and Sifuna 2006; UNESCO 2013). Here, there is no such thing as a girl’s experience. In this article, I focus on the diverse experiences of twenty Form III and IV students. Although some similar issues will be drawn out, they experienced these in different and sometimes contrasting ways. Furthermore, their rurality differed, in terms of space and experience. For example, some had mobile lives having in town or city settings and moved to the rural areas following the 2008 post-election violence or to look after grandparents. Others had

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<sup>1</sup> The community, schools and participants are given pseudonyms throughout this article. The community is known as Inka with two schools by the name of Omwana and Eskuru.

limited experience of life outside of Inka having lived in the same house and attended the same primary and secondary schools for their whole lives. These differences already begin to suggest that the dichotomous nature of the rural-urban is coming into question.

Gender equity emerged as a key component of educational quality at both the schools. This was particularly seen in the impact of out of school challenges on female students regularly attending and achieving a quality secondary education. These out of school factors were also shown to combine with those in-school to make a particularly challenging situation for many girls and it is suggested in this article that these are intensified by the rural space within which this takes place. In doing so, it is argued that the study of education is too often isolated from the wider social context and seeks to highlight the ways in which out-of-school and in-school challenges inter-relate (Dunne 2008).

### **The rural context**

The Kisii region of Kenya is situated in the South West of the country with the Tanzanian border to the South and Lake Victoria to the North. It is densely populated with the majority living in the rural areas where subsistence farming is the main source of income. The Kisii region is a context which is rarely documented with very little written about education in the region across the international and national literature. It is remarkably different to other regions of Kenya that tend to receive more attention, for example, the slum areas of Nairobi or the Masai pastoral communities. The case study community of Inka is a large market village approximately 25 kilometres from Kisii town. It was once ten kilometres from a tarmac road making it feel very much in the interior despite its relatively close distance to Kisii town. However, in early 2011, a tarmac road was



constructed making it more accessible with shared car and bus services running every one or two hours to town.

Therefore, rather than the traditional construction of the rural community as marginalised and difficult to access, Inka is becoming increasingly connected to the nearby town of Kisii. Similarly, both primary and secondary schools are easily accessible by foot to all children in the community with four district and three provincial secondary schools within Inka.<sup>2</sup> However, it is important to note that for many children and their families, visiting Kisii is not a regular occurrence and there remain a number of social services and amenities that are less available than for those living in urban areas. Of particular relevance to the girls in this study, contraceptives were not easy to buy in the local community and even where they were available, girls noted that the close knit nature of the community made it difficult to get them privately. It thus offers an interesting site for this discussion of gender, education and rurality because it is an area which both fulfils and challenges a number of rural stereotypes.

Furthermore, the challenges that girls face out-of-school that impact on their ability to regularly access quality education offer similarly diverse rural experiences. They include some which fulfil rural stereotypes; the most often noted being the expectation to help with home chores. All five girls who were given diaries wrote that they had to help in the home after school with three particularly bemoaning the amount of work they were

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<sup>2</sup> There are three types of public secondary schools – national, provincial and district – in Kenya. The distinction is based on the catchment base for each type of school – national schools accept students from nationwide, provincial schools from the province and district schools only take students from the local district. This does not mean that all students go to school; at the secondary level, estimates from within the community suggest that around 50-60% attend. Although secondary education is nominally ‘free’ in Kenya, there remain costs such as lunch, uniform and exam fees which can act as barriers for students to access secondary school.

expected to do. In contrast, other commonly cited challenges include those about which discussions tend to exist only in urban spaces. A clear example of this being the issue of home brewing, selling and consumption of chang'aa (local liquor). This emerged as a key challenge across the student data despite being one that very little has been written about in the Kenyan context. The little that has been written in media sources focuses on examples in poor urban settings, perhaps where its impact is more visible. In the rural Inka community, chang'aa tends to be brewed in homesteads with many becoming 'dens' where it is sold and drunk. Both male and female students shared the negative impact that this had on their education but it is of particular relevance for girls since some discussed fear for their own safety within these homesteads.

The examples so far show how students face challenges that are traditionally viewed as 'rural' and 'urban' problems in the Inka community. The following example suggests the futility of continued discussion of an urban/rural dichotomy. The principal out-of-school challenge that girls shared was that of sexual expectation within the community. As one local stakeholder (2) eloquently observed, the 'girl-child is an endangered species' in the Inka community since their childhood is often cut short by expectations to engage in sexual behaviour at a young age.

The community represents a contradictory environment for young people when it comes to sexual behaviour. Secondary school students are repeatedly warned of the perceived ills that accompany sex by their teachers, parents, elders and members of the wider community. It is prohibited among students and they are told that being sexually active is not compatible with achievement. However, it is often those that are giving out the warnings who are openly engaged in promiscuity. Students in both schools wrote at length

in the essays about the challenges that girls faced in their class, of which all referred to sex. For example, five of the ten essays from Eskuru include discussion of the challenges that girls face including ‘pregnancy, abortion and school dropped [sic] out’ (Michael, Eskuru).

It emerged from interviews with students and teachers that some girls are involved in what Arnot et al. (2010) have described as ‘patronage sexuality’. This includes girls being paid for sex both in money and other essential items. One female support worker suggested that girls were having sex for as little as the cost of sanitary towels (Madame Elizabeth, Eskuru). It was posited by other teachers that some girls were engaging in this risky sexual behaviour for more frivolous resources including new clothes or free rides in the case of the motorbike drivers. The fact that girls are engaging in sexual relationships and that this is often by way of patronage sexuality was, thus, recognised across participant groups. However, it was the explanation as to why girls may be doing so which was not reflected upon, as is discussed in the following section.

Expectation to engage in risky sexual activity can thus be seen as a characteristic of this rural community which impacts on the girls in this study. They can also be seen as somewhere in between those traditionally seen as rural issues, for example teenage pregnancy and early marriage, and more ‘urban’ challenges including patronage sexuality. Abortion is another issue which emerged that is not usually discussed in relation to rural settings. In the case of Kenya, there is limited research on the topic reflecting its continued illegality and cultural shaming; the little that exists is restricted to studies within cities (Kenya Human Rights Commission 2010). In the Inka community, findings suggested that illegal and unsafe abortions did happen although this was shared in informal discussions with management committee members and it was not a topic that

teachers, students and parents were willing to discuss in detail. This appeared to be the case for one girl in my cohort (Susan) who it was suggested by a number of teachers had sought two illegal abortions locally in the previous 18 months. Although the details were not clear and it is was not something that I, as an outsider, was comfortable following up, it is a topic which again questions the urban-rural dichotomy. This highlights one so-called urban issue area warrants dedicated research to understand its nature and extent in rural settings.

### **The school context**

Regarding the school contexts, Omwana and Eskuru share a number of characteristics. They have similar school populations of between 150 and 250 students with slightly more boys than girls in each school, they accept students from the local area and have low levels of resources. The teaching body at Eskuru only consists of men but there are two female teachers at Omwana. Both schools have three female support staff. Despite significant differences in management styles and achievement levels which cannot be discussed at length here, similarities also existed in the schools' policies towards female students. For example, at both schools there were active efforts made to encourage pregnant students to both remain in and return to school. The guidance and counselling teacher (Omwana), for example, explained his sympathetic approach to one girl:

There is another girl in Form 4 who became pregnant ... she has now delivered and she is in class. The child is at home and it is three weeks old. Last week, when I was on duty I saw her. What happened is that during the course of the day, I talked to her, and said that she cannot be here from 6am until 6pm because you are affecting the psychology of that child at home. I told her at 1pm when they break for lunch, she goes home, she breastfeeds the baby and then she comes back. I have allowed that, I've written her an exit slip and I've told the watchman that she is to be allowed out of school.

The policies at both schools appeared successful in enabling girls to continue their education with four of the twenty Form III and IV girls involved in my research having young children.

Authors such as Dunne and Leach (2005) have shown the gender-differentiation that continues to exist in classrooms across Sub-Saharan Africa with girls receiving less attention and encouragement. In my classroom observations, girls and boys were treated similarly with greater disparity in attention being observed by achievement level rather than by gender. Girls were often given the opportunity to answer questions with some teachers explicitly seeking female voices even when they were often reluctant to speak up. In Omwana, this was a school policy with one of the management committee members explaining that s/he encouraged teachers to be 'gender sensitive; they are girl-child sensitive' (management committee 1, Omwana). Just one teacher at Omwana noted that they thought there continued to be inequalities in the classroom. Madame Eve (Omwana) spoke with passion regarding inequity in the classroom:

Female students have a huge challenge. When I first came, they were telling me they feel undermined, they say that boys are not treated the same way as girls. They were talking of boys being favoured. I didn't understand what favours they meant but they told me that they are ignored mostly by teachers.

Apart from this observation, it was not a challenge that was shared with me by other teachers.

### **Teacher gendered attitudes**

The school context, thus, suggests that gender equality is largely practiced. However, as Bhana (2010, 84) has noted 'gender equality is a formal instrument of the law, but gender is also mapped out by informal mechanisms of customary practices'. Teachers can be powerful individuals in young people's lives and their behaviors and attitudes can be highly influential (Bhana 2010; Phillips 2004). Such gendered power was witnessed in both schools where the majority of teachers and management committee were male and

many of these showed socially constructed and gendered attitudes towards their female students as the following examples demonstrate.

Most teacher interviews revealed recognition of the challenges that girls face both in and out of school. Some teachers spoke at length about these challenges while others made just passing comments alongside more practical issues such as the number of textbooks or the lack of computers in the school. However, what is particularly revealing, and of critical importance for this study, is the language used to explain the challenges that girls face. The challenges were often described as ‘problems’ and were frequently not explained beyond laying the blame at the feet of the girls with little recognition of the situation or other actors involved.

One clear way in which gender equality may have been ‘a formal instrument’ of the school but gender norms were still reproduced by the ‘informal mechanisms of customary practices’ or language was in regard to student pregnancy (Bhana 2010, 84). The schools may be making formal arrangements for pregnant girls and young mothers to stay in school but when teachers, frequently unprompted, spoke about the challenge, it was largely in ways that blamed the girls. This was particularly among male teachers but was also witnessed among the small female staff population. The girls were described as ‘very delicate and loose’ (Madame Jane, Eskuru) and ‘not serious like the boys...that is why some are getting pregnant, others are dropping out of school’ (Mr Evan, Eskuru). Another male teacher discussed the impact of patronage sexuality from HIV positive community members on girls in the school and demonstrated both in-depth understanding of this issue and concern for the girls involved. However, he also explained what he saw as ‘the main problem’ being:

...those ones in Form 3 is that they are not serious, that is why in the class, you find cases of pregnancy. Like, this term, there is one girl who is at home with a baby. There are two girls who were pregnant who left school earlier this term. Most of them are not serious in their studies (Mr Colin, Eskuru)

This suggests an assumption by some teachers that girls are making choices to be sexually active and become pregnant when evidence from among students points to it being an unintended consequence of community and peer pressure.

The perceived lack of seriousness was not only discussed in relation to their sexual activity but also as a more general critique of many of the girls. Madame Louise (Omwana), for example, suggests that the challenges for girls is that...

...they do not really take time to study. They take time with their friends, with relationships. At lunchtime there, you find them going out, going home, they drop school. You are in class, you are sitting with your boyfriend and at the end you become a failure. They will go through Form 1 to Form 4 and get an E or a D- which will not help them in the future.

Mr James (Eskuru) discussed the inequality in student attitudes towards their studies in similar terms. However, he took this one step further by attributing such imbalance as a challenge that he must face in his own profession. He explained that the lack of seriousness made it difficult for the teachers to get the girls 'to come up and reach that level where we expect them' after a school holiday. This suggests an implication that all girls are actively choosing not to work in the holidays, rather than understanding that they may be expected to work at home or conduct other family duties that boys may not have to do. However, it is interesting to note that he continued to say that he had observed a behaviour change among students and discussed his own in-class techniques which aimed to include girls. This suggests a potential shift in attitude and for rural stereotypes to be disrupted and challenged.

When the blame was not directed towards girls, teachers tended to point to parents who were described as ill-educated and not understanding of the needs of their daughters. Mr

Thomson (Omwana) talked broadly about how ‘parents view the girl child’ and discussed these issues in traditional rural gendered terms:

In the Kisii community, the girl child is expected to be married so the parents pay less weight to the girl child. You find that in a family where you have a girl and a boy, the boy has been taken to a provincial or national school but the girl has been brought to this school. A parent can go to the provincial school but they will not come here and ask how their daughter is doing. Attitude towards the girl child is poor ... Because the parents have a low attitude towards the girl child, you find that girls are performing abysmally.

One management committee member (4, Omwana) summed up this ‘blame culture’ by recognising that there are challenges such as early marriages, unwanted pregnancies and what s/he described as ‘illicit sex...engaging themselves in sexual activities, maybe sex for money’. When asked why s/he thought this was happening, she replied that ‘they don’t care; the attitude of the parents and the students themselves and the community encourages it’. However, findings from the previous section suggest that the prevalence of sexual relationships and unintended pregnancies should be understood within the socio-cultural context of the Inka community, despite the teachers’ affirmations that the blame laid at the feet of the ‘loose’ and ‘not serious’ girls and their parents.

### **Implications for students**

There was evidence to suggest that teacher attitudes are influencing the views of students towards their female peers and negatively affecting girls’ feelings of self-worth and well-being. The essay of Matilda (Form III, Eskuru) explicitly refers to the words of a teacher who has influenced her thinking in what makes girls seem ‘less serious in her studies’:

The problems challenging girls is ‘abortion. This is a big challenge facing girls not only here in our school but also with other schools. This problem comes when our fellow girls get themselves a pregnancy in a bad lucky and without being advised on what to do she ends up aborting the foetus. The science teacher said that it affect the girl and academically drops. (Original wording)

Peter’s essay is less explicit but still suggests that similar attitudes have affected his views that the blame lays with girls as he observes that ‘most challenges they faced are unwanted



pregnancy, abortion and school dropped [sic] out this make the performance of girls to be lower than that of boys' (Peter, Form III, Eskuru – original wording).

Among the Form III and IV cohorts involved in this research, there was also some evidence to suggest that these girls are influenced by the environment in which they are continually told that they are not being serious enough in their studies. What emerges is that these girls blame themselves for not achieving well in school, often repeating the words of their teachers who have chastised their work ethic. Faith is just one example of this as a shy girl who in her diary and interview is repeatedly self-critical. She deems it to be her fault that she is not getting higher marks; particularly so in sciences. Regarding Biology, she comments 'in practicals I am ok but coming to theory I need to pull my socks up - I am average'. She also describes Chemistry as a 'bad subject that makes school to be bad at times' and questions whether she puts 'a bad attitude towards it' (Faith Eskuru). In our interview, she came across as low in self-confidence and reflected on teachers' views that she had 'bad attitude' towards certain subjects. She also shared the view which was expressed by her fellow students, Ruth (Eskuru) and Hannah (Omwana), that she was influenced by other students, especially girls, who did not take their work seriously.

Ruth shared many of the same concerns about her ability and particularly reflected on the fact that she was not able to study at home because of familial expectations to help in the home. She did not reflect how this impacted her studies but rather blamed herself for not concentrating in class or trying hard enough. In our interview, she also made the following insightful comment:

For a girl child, when we have finished our education and the time we are outside, we have to have to courage to handle ourselves...and to control ourselves from such diseases. (Ruth, Form IV, Eskuru)

Ruth believes that it is for the individual girl to ‘handle herself’ and ‘control herself’. This suggests the influence of the views of teachers, and other adults, regarding the blame on the individual girls about sex and the ways in which such gendered attitudes can affect a girl’s self-worth. This feeling of individual fault is also demonstrated in the essay of Julia (Omwana, Form III) who became pregnant in Form II after she ‘started walking with peer groups that were having boyfriends’ who told her ‘to accompany them to have one boy’. She dropped out of school ‘because it was shameful to go to school having pregnancy’ but has since returned to Form III and she is ‘struggling to complete my education’. The language she uses in her essay demonstrates that she is hopeful about her future but it also suggests feelings of self-blame and a struggle to reaffirm her self-worth within a context where she has felt ‘shamed’.

This suggests that gendered attitudes impact on girls’ emotional well-being and that schools are one of the sites in the rural context where they are reproduced. Gender inequalities are in this way defined despite the formal measures in place to encourage the opposite. When considered together with the increasingly challenging out-of-school issues, it can be seen that the rural context actively impacts on the educational realities of many girls. However, there are also suggestions that the teachers’ attitudes are being challenged and negotiated with greater efforts being made to both keep girls in school and supported.

## **Conclusions**

Findings have revealed that while gender equality in the classrooms and access to schooling is promoted, teacher language remains largely derogatory. It has further been

shown that teachers play an important role in reproducing gender dynamics within the school context and their attitudes have the potential to accentuate girls' self-perceptions. There is some evidence that specific policies have the potential to challenge teachers' perspectives and behaviour and so to a certain extent could 'enable or disable' the type of 'transformation' that Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008, 98) call for in rural communities. However, it is not enough to expect policy and pedagogy reform to lead to gender equality when teacher discourses continue to reproduce gender inequalities at school.

Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) have further argued that living in the rural can be more intense and challenging. The qualitative findings from this study have pointed to the multiple vulnerabilities that girls are facing and it has been argued that these are determined by the rural socio-cultural space in which they live and are educated. These different out-of-school factors come together to create an increasingly barriers for many girls. The context that these girls, and those living in other rural areas, live in needs greater attention to reveal further challenges.

Challenge the traditional dichotomies that may now be out-of-date.

This article has also highlighted the difficulties in rurality theory of conceptualising the futility of the rural-urban dichotomy while still arguing for the specificity of the rural experience.

As highlighted above, there is only limited literature which focuses on rurality and the way it intersects with gender and education to characterise the experiences of young people across Africa. At a time of rapid expansion of schooling across the continent and the size of the youth population, understanding the diverse experiences of these young people living in rural contexts is increasingly important. This article has offered a single

story. There are many more to consider. More research is needed in African contexts to further develop a theory of African rurality which recognises the rural of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the varied and complex landscape that this represents, far from the homogeneous, backward representation that seems to be out of date.

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